

the sight of a flower in bloom by 10pintsofsacrifice

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Summary:

Will knows he's not the same. He's working on accepting it.

the sight of a flower in bloom

Author's Note:

warning for uses of the f and q slurs, detailed descriptions of anxiety, and a section where will thinks about dying. the "minor body horror" refers to will getting sick in the upside down and having black vomit.

wrt the "emotional/psychological abuse" tag, lonnie forces the toxic masculinity mentality on will and often talks to/about will in an abusive way.

The first time you get a crush on a boy is in third grade, and he makes your heart flutter weirdly every time you see him.

You try to capture his likeness in your own private drawings. There's always something just the tiniest bit off when you do, but you keep drawing him day after day, striving to create something you'd be proud to give to him.

He's really only a playground friend, just someone who'll let you play kickball with he and his friends if you want, nothing at all like a best friend that you spend hours on the phone with and spend more nights at each other's houses than your own.

You know he's not like Mike, Dustin or Lucas; you barely know each other. But you know him enough to like him, stomach swarming with butterflies every time he smiles at you, only able to give a shy smile or a wave in return.

If you were braver you'd try to get closer to him; try to be friends with him. You're much more content with admiring him from afar most often. The moments in which you wish he could be one of your best friends too comes more often than you'd like to admit, but you're able to push it down.

You don't tell anyone about it, unsure how to go about that kind of thing. Usually boys like girls, if you're not mistaken, and you're not a girl.

Eventually you get over it. He moves far away from Hawkins a year later. You're ashamed to say that despite not being close, you do miss him.

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"You stop talking about our *son* like that," you hear your mom late one night when you get out of bed for a glass of water, words hissed coldly and more tense than the most awkward silence. "I can't believe this, Lonnie. He's our boy and I can't believe that you'd even say something like that."

"No son of mine is gonna be a faggot," your dad slurs harshly. You can tell immediately he's been drinking - he likes to do that a whole lot lately, you've noticed; you don't know whether it's because of the fights with your mom or because of losing his job.

"Even if he did like boys that shouldn't be a problem." You hear your mom sigh angrily and you imagine her, forehead in her palm, shaking her head in annoyed disbelief. "How can you tell me that you wouldn't accept your own son, your own flesh and blood that you promised to love? He's our baby boy and goddamn it that should be the *least* of our worries, when he could be doing God knows what who knows where instead."

You press yourself against the wall, heart hammering in your chest. Something suddenly feels very wrong inside you. You're not quite sure what to make of it, at the moment. You're ready to just go back to bed - but something keeps you rooted to the spot. You cover your mouth with your hand and strain your ears.

A heavy silence sits in the air between them, filled with this electric type of hostility, one that's become all too common. Your stomach aches.

"All the boys down in the yard are always talkin' 'bout how my boy's a fairy," your dad says. He snorts disgustedly, like he can't even handle the idea of it, and your heart gives a lurch as you sink down the wall as quietly as you can. When you hit the carpet, you knead it between your fingers - some threads come loose, giving way with steady ease. You can't shake the utter feeling of wrongness. "That's all they ever talk about, Joyce. There's nothin' right about those

fairies, and you know it, everybody knows it and my son will *not* be one of ‘em.”

You bite your lip, trying to resist the urge to pick at your nails. “I honestly can’t believe what I’m hearing right now,” your mom says callously. Her voice is spiked with this certain kind of fire. You hope it diffuses before it lights and the screaming begins. “William is our son and you’re saying this, saying these awful things.”

Your dad slams his palms down on the counter, and you flinch despite yourself at the noise, eyes squeezing shut as you throw up your arms in defense, a reflex you can’t let go of.

He says something too quiet for you to make out from where you are. You take this as your opportunity to stumble to your feet. You don’t realize you’re shaking until you try to stand, nearly tumbling forward in your hurry to get up, and your pulse thumps hard. You take a deep breath, pressing a flat hand to your chest, worrying your lip between your teeth.

You feel a knot in the pit of your stomach - it feels so much worse than it usually does - and it aches worse than you’re used to. It’s a weird mixture of nausea and shame that you can’t explain. You dash down the hall as quiet as possible, watery heat pricking your eyes. You don’t hear anything after you pull your door shut, back pressed against the door, swiping your hand quickly over your face. The tears ache in your throat like fire.

You push your ruffled bangs from your eyes, vision blurring faster than you can wipe the tears away. The tears slide down your cheeks and collect at your chin. It itches but you don’t bother wiping them away.

You manage to make your way to your bed. You settle into bed slowly, rolling to your side.

The tears slip over the bridge of your nose, your own personal river. The heat in your cheeks is almost uncomfortable, the heat sinking into your pillow too quickly for you to relax.

You don’t know how much time passes until you exhale and the sobs

slow to a stop. You're too tired to keep crying, you realize, and when the shakes subside your eyes burn. You end up flipping your pillow over so you can try to get comfortable again; your eyes start slipping closed as you reach for your fan. When it turns on it (slightly) startles you but the soft breeze is nice. You're too exhausted to care about hearing the front door slam, because you already know it's your dad anyway. You don't think he's driving but he'll probably go on a walk or something.

You put another pillow over your head. The added darkness is comforting...just not enough.

It's not new for you to go to bed anxious, but this is a different kind that you don't know how to deal with. After hearing your dad talk about you like that you're uneasy. You feel like just maybe there is something wrong with you, and he's right.

A cold wave of dread washes over you. Girls have never made you feel the way boys do. You don't think they ever will, and - it scares you. You never once thought that it wasn't normal. You never thought it was wrong. You can't make it go away even if you try. The thought of telling anyone about this suddenly seems impossible.

There's the pressure of more tears but they don't come. You keep your eyes closed, breathing through your nose, trying to drift off so you don't have to think or feel for a bit, and it's taking longer than you'd like. It would be better if your stomach wasn't upset. You feel the faint reaches of a headache coming on, a dull pang. You groan quietly, turning the other way to face the fan. The way it brushes through your hair feels weird. You decide it's good enough.

You don't know when, but eventually you fall asleep to the low hum of the fan and your own thoughts, and you don't have any dreams you can remember. Just a lonely darkness that never really ends.

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When you get a crush on Mike Wheeler everything is awful. There's not a chance in hell you could tell anyone, let alone Mike himself and God only knows what he and your friends would think; they might not even want to be your friend anymore; that thought alone is

enough to deter you. But the shame is what does it.

All you can think about is what your dad said, and it twists your guts into nervous knots. When Mike gives you one of his pretty smiles you feel burned. You can't stop the blush from spreading over your cheeks. In the moment you can pretend that nothing's wrong and it's just a passing thing. If you keep telling yourself that eventually it'll be true. If you don't talk about it, it isn't there.

You want to tell someone, like maybe your mom, or Jonathan. You know they'd understand and they'd still love you for sure. As for your friends, you have no idea. You already have to deal with Troy and James constantly being in your face, and you don't want to see once friendly faces join the ranks of the two of them. You have nightmares about that sometimes. Not that anyone knows it, though.

You think if you had to describe it you'd call it self-loathing, this deep personal distaste for how you are, knowing that you're wired wrong and unable to fix it. You'd tried so hard to fix it and just like girls, but you couldn't feel the same way. You'd even tried to convince yourself that you had a crush on Jennifer Hayes. No matter how many times you'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror quietly chanting to yourself that you liked her, you couldn't produce the feelings that came with the statement.

You avoid any talk of crushes and laugh it off if anyone asks you. Sometimes Dustin waggles his eyebrows and asks who the secret lady is, and you snort and roll your eyes, firmly declaring that there is no secret lady.

Because there isn't and there won't ever be, and you know that. When you think about it you laugh to yourself bitterly, horribly aware that every thing Troy and James and your dad said about you is right.

You go to bed crying more often than not, only stopping when you've worked yourself into exhaustion, unable to keep your eyes open anymore. The pinpricks of anxiety stop going away. You feel them in your fingertips constantly along with the guilt trapped in your throat.

You know now that there's something wrong with you, that a boy

who likes boys is not a normal boy.

Everything you've heard about people like you has been a offhand comment of disgust. There's really no comfort to be found within this. You just have to live with it and keep it quiet.

Mike, being as perceptive as he is, notices that something's wrong. He asks you if you're okay, points out the bags under your eyes from nights spent not sleeping, and he tells you if you need to talk you can talk to him. "I'll be alright Mike. Thank you for the concern though. I'm just sleeping weird, that's really all there is to it and it'll go away soon. Are we still gonna finish that campaign after school?"

That manages to take his attention off you, and he starts excitedly going on about how this is one of the best ones yet, and you can't help but smile at his enthusiasm. You think Mike's writing is similar to your drawing, a quiet kind of talent that could get him somewhere. The way he constructs the arcs in the campaigns is breathtaking. They create this air of excitement and fear and anticipation all at once. You think his writing is beautiful, the same way he thinks your art is excellent, and the idea of it makes your blood feel warm. Like maybe sunlight is running through your veins, instead of blood. But even then the shame sneaks in. You're stuck between this strange sense of being happy and being guilty, and it's not ideal. Being you isn't ideal lately. Hating yourself seems to take a lot out of you.

But you give Mike your best attempt at a grin and pull your kickstand up, and grip your handlebars like you'd die if you let go of them.

"Alright," you say. "See you later then!"

He smiles and waves; he yells goodbye and tells you to be safe as you retreat. With practiced balance, you take one hand off the handlebars and give him a thumbs up, only keeping it out long enough for him to see it, then you slam it back down so you don't crash. You don't want to deal with that today and you're sure it wouldn't help your grace factor.

The ride home is peaceful, silent and pretty as you turn your head occasionally to the woods. You're drawn to them. Something about them is comforting and it's why you built Castle Byers in the thin

woods of your backyard.

You almost don't notice when asphalt turns into gravel.

The dirt road of your driveway is a welcome relief, and slow warm comfort starts to roll over you soft and in waves, flowing through your veins and your heart and easing the aching in your stomach, and though it doesn't remove it you find it eased. You know your mom won't be home for a few hours, and Jonathan had told you and your mom yesterday that he wanted to go out for some pictures today. To your great relief and slight guilt, you're home alone.

You decide to sleep for a bit - just to relax - and hope it helps.

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You shouldn't have left Mike's house. You should've said it was too far to go on your own. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Something follows you home. Something unlocks your front door. Something makes the light bulb in your shed go impossibly bright and then burn out. You have no idea where you end up after that but you land on your back, coughing and spluttering and trying to punch the breath back into you. The ground is wet with some sort of slime. If you had to use a word to describe what this place that looks weirdly like Hawkins looks like, you'd use the word dead honestly. It looks exactly like Hawkins but more dilapidated. More alien than you've ever thought it to look, and you don't have the slightest clue on how to get out.

You only scream for help once. The hopeless sound of your voice resounds back to you and you decide to keep quiet. You take note of small dust-like things floating through the air. Everything is overrun with this black wet-looking vegetation that you can't identify. It's colder than any winter in Hawkins, and there's no light to be found, and suddenly you know you're alone.

Minus the presence of that monster of course. Besides that you're certain you're the only other living thing here, and you get the uneasy feeling that this place has seen other humans, but those other humans never saw the light of day again. It makes your stomach

twist in distress.

The idea of sitting down anywhere here feels loathsome. So instead you walk the familiar roads you've known your whole life, deeply unsettled by the resemblance to your home town. It almost feels like this is a dark copy. You've read about alternate dimensions in books. Maybe this is one of them.

If you're right you wonder how many people have been here before you.

The silence is more than disturbing, accompanied by the too-sharp stillness all around you, and you feel like a boy lost in time. Like you're halfway between realities, being pulled apart in both directions.

You think of your mom and how worried she's going to be that you didn't come home. Jonathan had to take extra hours today, so he wasn't home when you got there. You know he didn't tell your mom, because she doesn't think you can handle staying home alone, and you know she's going to be furious with your older brother later.

The pit of your stomach drops when that thought crosses your mind. If you can't get back -

Lonely and frustrated tears build up behind your eyes. You cough from deep in your chest, the sound ugly and rasping. You blink rapidly, willing the tears away. Now is no time to be crying like a little kid, you reason.

Then suddenly - the crack of a stepped-on branch. You swear your blood turns to ice in your veins. You know it's that thing that took you here. You don't stick around to check and instead speed away faster than you've ever run in your life.

You hear this creepy maybe-laugh in the distance, and despite the agonizing burn in your chest and legs, you force yourself to keep going. You keep your eyes out for any sort of hiding place. When you spot Mike's house up ahead you make a mad dash for it and somehow go even *faster*. Terror is an amazing motivator when you're certain you're running for your very life, you note.

Your hands shake pulling the door open, and you don't hesitate for one minute to sprint up the stairs, tripping a few times in your rush to get to Mike's bedroom. Breaths coming out fast and ragged and tearing your throat each time you inhale, you throw Mike's closet doors open and let yourself fall in before you pull them closed to hide yourself from view.

In the silence of a place you know so well, you let the tears run freely, sobbing into your hands and coughing quietly, and it hurts. You wheeze into your palms as the stinging fades in your limbs. You hate this.

You don't even have a real idea of where you are, just that it's like home but cold and dark and hopelessly empty. There is no warmth in this place and you breathe on your hands to try and shock some heat into them.

You're going to die here, you're certain, because of starvation and dehydration. Or maybe you'll freeze to death, which wouldn't be so bad if it could be in Mike's bedroom. Maybe you could pretend it's just a cold sleepover, pretend it's winter and you're just not warm enough. The other possibility is that the monster will catch you. You can only run so fast for so long. You can only run so far - you'll run out of places to hide, you'll make too much noise and get caught - you can only imagine what something that looks like that will do to you. Your chest shakes with the sobs, terror taking root in your heart.

Strangely, Jonathan comes to you.

He'd tell you to be strong and that you'll be alright, you just have to be careful. He'd promise to find a way to bring you home, if you couldn't find your way out alone. It brings you little comfort but it brings you enough to try to keep going.

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It's so damn cold and you're so damn tired. The blankets in Castle Byers are gross and moldy but you can't bring yourself to care. Your fingertips and lips have already turned blue, and you can feel yourself getting sicker with every breath you take.

Your lungs rasp with every inhale and it's an ugly dying sound. Your stomach is the kind of hollow that aches. Your throat hurts worse than any time you've ever gotten sick, but you don't have it in you to even feel thirsty anymore.

You're soaked to the bone and you can't really explain why. The grime all over you, that's something you understand - it's filthy here, dirt turned black and muddy, water reflecting a distorted dying boy and air clearly unsafe to breathe. You don't know when you stopped crying but you know afterwards you stopped feeling much of anything. There's no hope left in you for any kind of escape, no energy to try and keep yourself hidden for safety, not enough spirit to keep yourself moving and awake, and when you lay your head down you feel vaguely comforted by the familiarity of this place. You're pretty certain that you're dying.

You think of Mike as you lay there in the damp silence, heart thumping weakly as if being tired itself. If you'd have known that you never would've seen him again after that night, you would've said to hell with it and told him, told him how you really feel and how you are. You were never even able to tell yourself that out loud, but you would've told him.

The tears roll over the bridge of your nose when you sink into memories, You, Dustin, Lucas and Mike spending long nights marathoning Star Wars, debating theories and laughing and just enjoying each other's company like kids your age should be doing. You'd give anything to have that back, even if it were only for a night. You'd tell the three of them how much you love them and how thankful you are that they're in your life, and they'd be confused but you're sure they'd agree, and maybe you'd all share a huge hug pile. The ache in your chest deepens as you think of their voices, their faces and the way they smile.

Your mom, face soft, comes into picture.

Jonathan follows her, dark eyes focused on you in concern, and you can almost feel his hand on your shoulder.

"I'm sorry," you rasp out. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't strong enough to make it through this. I tried so hard but I don't think I can do it. I just

want to come home and be normal and be safe, b-but I can't." Your voice breaks at the end of your sentence, your throat painfully resisting the words you push out. "I don't even care if I die at this point but I feel bad that I never said goodbye. S-so I guess I'm saying it now, and I'm sorry I couldn't be stronger, and I love you."

You cough, the act rough. Your conscience feels slightly cleared having said your goodbyes. You know no one heard you; it's for you, more than anything so you can die comfortably.

Your stomach rolls with nausea. You try as hard as you can to keep any vomit down because you're not in the shape to get up. In the end that fails. You at least turn your head.

Your vomit is coloured a dark toxic-looking black, the consistency of the mud you have on the hems of your jeans.

You don't even startle when you open your eyes to a flash of pink, and look up into the face of a wide-eyed girl with hair shaved down to her scalp, human hands warm in yours when she takes them. Her face is drawn in concern, eyes filled with tears. For a long while you just stare at each other. You think you see the faintest hint of a smile on her lips. She squeezes your hand, and you can barely feel it but you squeeze back. She lets out a sigh that sounds relieved, like she's been waiting to find you. You don't even know who she is. Something about her feels comforting though, like she understands you, like she wants to get you out of here, but you're too tired to even think about getting up. She tells you to hold on and that your mother's coming. She tells you that you just need to stay alive.

Despite yourself you tell her that you'll try. When she fades into the air like dust in the wind you feel properly empty. The hollow in your stomach just gets deeper when you consider what she said.

You want so badly to believe her words. There's not a thing in the world you want more, but you're so tired and you don't want to feel anymore.

Your eyes slip shut. The darkness is nothing new, and is something you're accustomed to. You wait to go numb. Nothing will hurt and everything will be okay. You won't have to be afraid anymore...and you won't have to fight for your life. It can't take your life from you if

you do it first, and if you can die by your own hand, instead of being killed at the hand of that monster, you'd take that any day. You suppose that it's some twisted form of bravery, the kind people feel in their last moments. It's not like you know from experience. It's just what happens most often in movies and books and anything else you read.

They say your life is supposed to flash before your eyes. You wonder what you're going to see, if you see anything at all, or if it'll bring you enough comfort to at least make you happy.

It's a stretch. ...Whatever, you think to yourself. If you're going to die you may as well do it while your best memories are there with you. Your breaths even out - deep and slow; the sick rasping of your lungs is more evident. You feel something warm drip down your chin. When you bring a hand up to wipe it away, there's this dark red blood smeared on your fingers. You wish it at least scared you - wish that you were afraid to die - but you don't feel a single thing.

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You don't know how you got yourself to the Hawkins Lab of Energy or why you're here.

It feels foreboding, too big and too still. The flora of this place lines the wall - there's a cold grip of terror on your heart when you notice the human remains, infused in the strange fleshy masses. You can't even bring up the courage to reach out and touch them. What shocks you the most, though, is that there's so many skeletal bodies left here. So you were right, you weren't the first one here, and you probably won't be the last.

You wonder just how many people this monster has taken, how many disappeared without a trace, how many families fell apart when they didn't come home.

The harsh scrape of the breaths you draw in echoes around the room, the sound swirling around your head and reminding you of how diseased you are. Despite being freezing cold, a sweltering fever has taken hold of you. It's like a very bad flu. Your head throbs with a migraine you've had for days.

You trail your hand along the wall for a moment, the slime having long since stopped bothering you. After all you're covered in it, so it's too late to be disgusted. The feeling of the growths on the wall is rough and lined like callouses. You frown.

Something about it draws you to it, your bones gravitating to the wall, and you find a perfect little alcove for your body to rest. Within a few moments black vines swarm over your arms and legs. You're locked into place and you're comfortable.

You feel at ease when you close your eyes. It can't hurt to rest for a bit, you decide, so you let yourself float into unconsciousness.

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They tell you Hopper had to beat the life back into you.

You wake up in a white room that smells sharp. When your eyes open Jonathan and your mom are sitting beside you. You reach out for them, eyes burning with sleepiness, and you faintly register the dull ache of all the I.V.s and the tubes in your nose. Jonathan's hand is bandaged up and he cries and smiles when you ask if he's okay. Your mom tells Jonathan to let the boys know that you're awake.

Within moments three tired-looking boys rush into the room. There's not a dry eye to be found. They all take turns giving you desperate hugs, expressing their relief that you're alive and well, or at least alive and healing. You feel bad for worrying them but you're here as it is. That's got to count for something, you suppose.

Mike lays his head on your chest as gentle as he can. You bring your hands up weakly to pat his head. You don't even try to fight off the blush on your cheeks. It feels blessedly real and human of you to feel, so you let yourself feel it.

You tell them that the Demogorgon got you. Mike says that he knows. They tell you that a girl named Eleven from the Lab, she destroyed it but she's gone. You can see the sadness in Mike's eyes, the mourning in the way they all carry themselves, and when you ask if she wore a pink dress your mom covers her mouth.

You're in this weird state of knowing and not knowing her. Something tells you, though, that she's still alive. It's clear that the boys think she's dead - but something in you says otherwise, the faintest whisper of hope, the feeling of being connected to someone that took your place.

They refuse to leave your side for as long as they can after that. Dustin and Lucas fall asleep together in matching hospital chairs.

Mike, though, carefully crawls onto your hospital bed: Something your mom at first declines, but you give her this tired look, and she nods while running a hand through your hair. Mike even finds a way to press himself under the blanket with you.

You turn your face into his neck, and he giggles while saying your nose is cold, hands resting side by side on the top of the covers. When your mom and Jonathan leave the room to tell your friends' parents, Mike sighs like he's exhaling all of his stress, and his hand brushes yours for a moment.

"Is it okay if I, um," Mike says, taking your hand and intertwining your fingers, "Is this okay with you?"

"Yeah," you murmur, and you fall asleep with a smile.

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You're standing in front of the mirror - taking in your reflection - you're a more tired version of yourself, but otherwise you're okay and thankfully very alive. You lean your weight into your palms as you lean forward over the sink.

"My name is Will Byers. I'm alive and okay and I made it out of the Upside Down. I might be scared, and I might be having a lot of nightmares but I'm alive. My name is Will Byers and I'm alive and I'm a..."

You squeeze your fists - the words get caught in your throat - but you owe it to yourself to get them out, so you clear your throat loudly. You face yourself in the mirror and look yourself in the eyes.

"I'm - I'm gay," you say quietly, but then louder: "My name is Will

Byers and I'm gay."

The weight that sat on your chest - it feels slightly lessened, after being able to admit that to yourself in honesty.

Your eyes fill with tears, for once not out of fear, but out of joy. You deserve to feel comfortable with it. You had a lot of time and things to think about in the Upside Down - admittedly, that's all you could do - and you'd decided that you needed to accept yourself. It's taken long enough and you know it isn't changing.

But to hear yourself say it, that's something all its own. It's a good feeling, one that leaves you warm and overwhelmingly relieved. If you can accept yourself you can do anything. At least, that's what it feels like to you. Whatever your dad said doesn't matter: What matters is that you're okay with yourself.

You run out of the bathroom. When you skid into the kitchen in your socks, your mom takes one look at your blotchy wet face and is immediately by your side. You wrap your arms around her middle and laugh.

She looks down at you, worry evident in her eyes and her face drawn in concern, but there's the workings of a smile slowly forming on her face. Even if it's a confused one she still smiles and you smile right back. She rubs circles into your back, her touch soft and calming and everything you need.

"Will, what's going on, are you doing okay? Have you been crying?" she asks.

You press your face into her shirt again before pulling away. "I've got something really important to tell you. It's taken me a long time to figure out. I've realized that I'm comfortable enough to talk about it."

She gives you a soft knowing smile and nods. "Whatever you tell me it'll be fine," she murmurs softly. "You know I'm always going to love you, no matter what you tell me baby. Nothing could ever make me love you any less. You know that Jonathan will too and your friends...if you're ready to tell me then I'll listen."

Your eyes are watery, but you open your mouth. You blink the tears away so you can focus.

"I realized that it doesn't matter what anyone else says," you manage. "It's okay for me to be a boy that likes boys and not girls, even if dad and Troy and James hate me for it. They don't matter, not in the way that's important...I know what matters is the people that love me. I spent so long hating myself, and wishing I could be normal because I thought maybe something was wrong with me. No matter what did and told myself, it never went away. So I've decided that if it's not going away I might as well be okay with it."

Your mother lets out a choked sound, kneeling down to your level with her hands on your shoulders - "I'm so proud of you right now Will."

You smile. "I'm h-happy I was able to love myself enough to tell you," you stutter, "because I never thought I'd be able to, but I had a lot of time to think in that - place, and I decided that for better or worse this is me."

She pulls you into your arms and hugs you hard. "It's definitely for the better."

You squeeze back just as hard. "I'm g-glad you think so too," you breathe out. "I-I think someday it'll be better for kids like me and I won't h-have to be afraid, o-or make myself sick with anxiety. So, y-yeah. That's all."

Your mother stands slowly: She takes your hand and ruffles your hair, her eyes soft and warm and so full of love.

"You're very brave, Will," she tells you, squeezing your hand lightly with a grin, leaning down to kiss the top of your head. "So very very brave."

You feel a fresh new wave of tears coming on. "I'm trying my best."

She laughs softly as she moves to the stove. "Your best is more than enough, you know."

For once you believe her. Not everything is going to be okay. But you

think you can face it.

//

When you tell your friends, nothing changes between you.

Lucas just tells you it's alright with him and he smiles. Dustin hugs you tightly; he thumps your back and says he's happy for you. Mike, though, Mike is a different story, but not in a bad way, not in a "we're never gonna be friends again" way, to your complete relief.

"Mike, can I, um," you say softly. "Can I tell you something?" Your cheeks heat up, partially from being so close to Mike and partially from what you're going to say. He turns his eyes to you; they're honest and soft. He puts his hand over yours and your heart starts racing, and you're certain that your blush has gotten darker. You look away from his face so he doesn't see.

"Of course," he says with a smile, and you clear your throat gently. "You can tell me anything. If you want to, I mean."

"I do want to tell you this," you say, and the nervous knot slowly dissolves in your gut, finally allowing you to relax into Mike's side. "It's important. It kind of scares me. I-I just wanted you to know, um, I don't...I don't like girls, Mike."

"That's - that's okay," Mike says with a soft dusting of pink on his cheeks, wrapping an arm around your shoulders reassuringly. "I don't mind at all, um. A-actually I, uh, I like b-boys *and* girls if I'm being honest, so it'd be hypocritical if I - if I was gonna judge you." He lets out a nervous laugh as the blush on his cheeks deepens to a steady red, bringing out his freckles. He looks beautiful. His face looks soft in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

You lean into him and hide your face. He asks if you're okay, only to jump a little as he settles a hand on your back, realizing that you're not crying but laughing.

"God, I...I didn't even think...I feel a lot better now and I hope you know I'm okay with you too," you giggle, voice muffled because of you pressing your face into his chest. "I'm glad. Is there...something

else I can say?"

"Go a-ahead," Mike says fumblingly.

"I just, it's been on my mind for awhile...I-I thought you should know too, because I thought about it a lot in t-the Upside Down. I f-figured it'd be okay now, and I just don't w-want you to hate me, but here goes nothing anyway. I-I, um, I like you. I like you a lot, okay?"

You hide your face in your hands, embarrassed, too afraid to say anything more. You're shocked to feel the lack of tears pricking your eyes and instead there's just the hammering of your heart. When you feel brave enough to peek at Mike through your fingers, you find that he's *smiling*.

"That's honestly such a huge relief that I almost can't believe you just said that. I've been thinking a lot about it since you disappeared, Will...I-I like you too, okay? We don't have to b-be anything other than friends if you don't want to. But i'd be lying if I said I didn't, um, w-want to kiss you at least a little."

You grin so wide that your face hurts and you realize then that you haven't been smiling, your face isn't used to it anymore. "T-then you, um...you can if you want, I wouldn't mind if you w-wanted to kiss me, and - me too, if I'm being honest, I've t-thought about it too, and also you give me these butterflies which absolutely isn't f-fair at all - but I forgive you for it anyway."

He laughs and starts to lean in slowly, this shy smile you don't see too often on his face. He moves in until your faces are inches apart...and then he exhales on your nose, causing a soft giggle to escape the both of you - his faces scrunches up, in that way you're especially fond of, and a whole new rush of fuzzy feelings and butterflies overcomes you, and you bump noses with him and you smile - then he leans in and presses his lips to yours in a quick chaste kiss.

You blush hard as your eyes fall closed, electricity igniting in the pit of your stomach like nothing you've ever felt before. You press your hands to his cheeks before he can pull away fully. You press another kiss to his lips, heart racing wildly. Mike hums into your mouth in

surprise but he kisses back just as desperately.

When you pull away you're both a little breathless.

Mike is quiet for a moment before he laughs, taking your hands into his - your head is still spinning with the fact that you did indeed just kiss Michael Wheeler, but you join in with your own dazed and delighted laugh, nuzzling against his shoulder.

Things still aren't okay. They might not be okay for awhile, or maybe even ever. But - you're hopeful and you have support. That's all you need.